



**MURRAY STATE**  
UNIVERSITY

**Steeplechase: An ORCA  
Student Journal**

Volume 2  
Issue 1 *Spring* 2018

Article 5

2018

# “The Only Way Out Is In”: Negotiating Identity through Narrative in *The House on Mango Street* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

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## Recommended Citation

Taylor, Brianna E. (2018) "“The Only Way Out Is In”: Negotiating Identity through Narrative in *The House on Mango Street* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*," *Steeplechase: An ORCA Student Journal*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/steeplechase/vol2/iss1/5>

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### **Author's Note**

During her time writing this thesis, the author was learning to become an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher. She went to a local elementary school every day to work with third and fourth grade English language learners from places such as Somalia, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Guatemala, and the Dominican Republic. She would often listen to them transition seamlessly between English and Spanish, talk about the Somali language, tell stories about visiting their parents' home countries, and, most of all, ask endless amounts of questions. One day, a little girl asked what the word *European* in their reading passage meant. The young teacher responded that a European is someone who is from Europe. The girl pondered this answer for a moment before saying that she was not sure where she was from. When the teacher asked her to explain what she meant by that, the girl said that her parents were from Guatemala. The young teacher enthusiastically told the student that she was Guatemalan-American, uncomplicating the issue entirely.

## Introduction

In the past fifty years, Latino/a literature has emerged as a distinct genre of American literature that broadly includes writers whose heritage involves both the United States and any Latin American country. Authors like Sandra Cisneros and Junot Díaz are both categorized as Latino/a literature in spite of how markedly different their circumstances are. Cisneros was born in Chicago to a Mexican father and a Mexican-American mother. Her family frequently migrated between Chicago and Mexico City before moving to a neighborhood called Humboldt Park, which would later become her inspiration for the fictional Mango Street (“Sandra Cisneros: Pioneering Latina Writer,” n.d.). Cisneros began writing in high school and later attended Loyola University of Chicago and graduate school at the University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop. The latter is where she would begin writing *The House on Mango Street* (Juffer). Unlike Cisneros, Díaz lived in the Dominican Republic before his family immigrated to the United States when he was six years old, inspiring a lifelong fascination with Santo Domingo. He grew up in Perth Amboy, New Jersey and went on to attend Rutgers University as an undergraduate to pursue a Master of Fine Arts Degree at Cornell University (González 1-2).

Cisneros and Díaz belong to the Latino/a literary movements that were a byproduct of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. By this time, established Mexican-American communities already existed in the United States, creating the appropriate conditions for the consolidation of a unified Chicano Movement in the 1960s and 70s (Román). Cisneros became a powerful voice in the following decade by contributing to the Chicana feminist movement, which challenged racism in a broader cultural context as well as sex-role expectations in Chicano culture. Chicana writers involved in this movement held an “intersectional understanding of identity and oppression” that understood the Mexican-American females’ social position as the interconnection between race, gender, sexuality, and class (Román).

Many of these issues are central to *The House on Mango Street*. Cisneros initially published the book in 1984 through the Latino/a publisher Arte Público Press, though it was later republished by mainstream publisher Vintage Press in 1991 when the interest and profitability in Latino/a literature increased (Cruz). Writings from Dominican-Americans like Díaz increased after the 1980s in response to the previous generation's diaspora from the Dominican Republic following the end of the Trujillo regime in 1961 (Román). Díaz explains that "even though [he] was living in a real, contemporary Jersey—into baseball, into hip-hop—[he] always felt the shadow of that past history was on [them]" as children of victims of a dictatorship ("Talks at Google" 00:19:42-00:19:55). This legacy pervades Dominican-American literature like Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, which attempts to translate this experience onto the page.

While Cisneros is an American-born child of an immigrant and Díaz is an immigrant himself as well as a child of diaspora, both enter a broader dialogue about what it means to live between countries, between languages, and between identities. In her semi-autobiographical work *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa establishes the language of the Borderlands where two cultures uncomfortably exist alongside one another:

The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in the constant state of transition. (25)

For Anzaldúa, living at the conflux of arbitrary boundaries continues to be a complex, violent, and confounding position to inhabit. It is its own country, language, and identity—“a border culture.” The hyphen in Mexican-American and Dominican-American attempts to communicate the complex relationship between multiple national identities by implying balance and secondary connection with the United States, but it is insufficient to capture the fluctuation, tension, and interaction between cultures that coexist in this space.

Just as Anzaldúa hybridized English with Spanish and Nahuatl within the poetry and prose in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, other writers who also inhabit a “border culture” have attempted to invent new written forms capable of capturing their realities. Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak writes that literature is an appropriate medium for transnational stories, or the stories that exist across national boundaries: “With its unique ability to cross spatial and temporal boundaries, literature transports us to and connects us with disparate spatial frameworks. . . [and] depict[s] alternate, not necessarily nation-based forms of community and identity” (18). As Mermann-Jozwiak suggests, the novel provides the opportunity for writers to redefine identity as something other than nationality. National languages, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, are a force to centralize these nation-based cultural, political, and social ideas (271). While unification creates a basis for mutual understanding between speakers of a language, unified ideology cannot contain language that is inherently unstable, perpetually in a state of flux and change (Bakhtin 272). Writers in the *Borderlands* truly contend with “discourse in a contradictory and multi-languaged world” (Bakhtin 275) through crafting the novel, as Bakhtin defines it, as “[a] diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized” (262). Transcribing, translating, and transposing these diverse voices into writing allows authors like Cisneros and Díaz to negotiate identity through narrative. This paper explores this complex process by analyzing form, perspective,

and narrative voice in Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* and Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Within both works, narrators Esperanza Cordero and Yúnior de Las Casas are able to examine their own Borderlands by artistically recreating their own experiences on paper.

## **I. Redefining Home in *House on Mango Street***

While earning a Master of Fine Arts at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, Cisneros discovered her voice by writing about the experiences that made her different from her classmates. In *A House of My Own: Stories from My Life*, an autobiographical collection of her own nonfiction pieces, Cisneros describes reading Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* in a graduate seminar on memory and imagination. Within this work, Cisneros elaborates on how difficult it was for her to identify with the vision of home that seemed commonplace for Bachelard and her classmates:

The conversation, I remember, was about the house of memory, the attic, the stairwells, the cellar. Attic? Were we talking about the same house? My family lived upstairs for the most part, because noise traveled down. Stairwells reeked of Pine-Sol from the Saturday scrubbing... And as for cellars, we had a basement, but who'd want to hide in there? Basements were filled with rats... What was this guy Bachelard talking about when he mentioned the familiar and comforting house of memory? (126-127)

Cisneros became frustrated with the realization that "none of the books in this class, in any of [her] classes, in all the years of [her] education" had ever described a house like the one where her family lived (127). She began rejecting conventions that were incompatible with her own life experiences by embracing her unique

voice and writing about the “ugliest and “most unpoetic” subjects that she could find (127). The prose-poetry vignettes created from this quiet rebellion would later become her first novel *The House on Mango Street*, where Cisneros fictionalizes her own house of memory and imagination. Throughout the novel, young Esperanza struggles against accepting the house on Mango Street as home as her own.

### *Forming a Narrative from Fragments*

*The House on Mango Street* is a collection of forty-four vignettes that function individually as snapshots of Esperanza’s life on Mango Street and collectively communicate her coming-of-age story. Cisneros skillfully crafts an engaging, powerful narrative voice that resonates with youthful simplicity and poignant honesty as Esperanza interacts with her neighbors on Mango Street and navigates adolescence. In the introduction to the novel’s twenty-fifth anniversary edition, Cisneros portrays Esperanza as an intermediary in order to explore questions she was afraid to answer for herself in the process of defining her adult voice (xxiv). Though Esperanza Cordero and Sandra Cisneros should not be misconstrued as the same person, Cisneros uses this proxy to tell the stories she knows, especially stories of women “whose lives were white crosses on the roadside” (*Mango Street* xxiv). Cisneros explains in an interview that *The House on Mango Street* makes sense of the myriad voices from her community: “What I’m doing here is writing true stories. They’re all stories I lived, or witnessed, or heard: stories that were told to me. I collected these stories and arranged them in order so they would be clear and cohesive. Because in real life, there’s no order” (Rodríguez qtd. in Grobman 42). The novel organizes these experiences into a logical framework where young Esperanza is able to develop consciousness and agency. Through the voice of Esperanza, Cisneros examines ineffable issues of identity in the ambiguous territory between childhood and adulthood, girl and woman, Mexican and

American, and inheritance and creation to define and redefine her own Chicana identity.

The appropriate medium to communicate Cisneros's newfound voice was an inventive form that she had never seen before. In place of the traditional novel, she envisioned "a story made up of a series of stories that would each make sense if read alone, or that could be read all together to tell one big story, each story contributing to the whole" (*A House of My Own* 128-29). Still, Cisneros writes that she did not initially think of these "little stories" as a novel even though she intuited that they were somehow connected: "It was just a jar of buttons, like the mismatched embroidered pillowcases and monogrammed napkins I tugged from the bins at the Goodwill" (*Mango Street* xv-xvi). These small, disconnected stories highlight Esperanza's everyday experiences and subtly reveal the narrator's increasing understanding of her unique position between borders. Piecing together these "mismatched" moments to create a unified story echoes Esperanza's process of coping with, accepting, and internalizing her experiences. Maria Karafilis claims that these "snippets, anecdotes, and often naively stated observations" challenge the reader alongside Esperanza to "make sense of these disjointed parts and fragments and construct them into a life, an experience, [or] a narrative" (67). Through writing, Esperanza claims the power of language to transform her "unpoetic" moments on Mango Street into the cohesive narrative of her life.

While Cisneros intentionally creates a novel that can be read in part or whole, the work as a whole explores the space between parallel opening and closing vignettes titled "The House on Mango Street" and "Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes." From beginning to end, Esperanza slightly modifies her understanding of Mango Street. In the opening paragraph, Esperanza simply states that her most significant memory is moving often: "We didn't always live on Mango Street. Before that we lived on Loomis on the third floor, and before that we lived on Keeler. Before Keeler it was Paulina, and before that I can't remember.



But what I remember most is moving a lot” (3). “Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes” closes the novel with the same statement but makes one key revision to Esperanza’s memory:

We didn’t always live on Mango Street. Before that we lived on Loomis on the third floor, and before that we lived on Keeler. Before Keeler it was Paulina, but what I remember most is Mango Street, sad red house, *the house I belong but do not belong to*. (109-110 emphasis added)

Esperanza remembers Mango Street in the most literal sense of the word *remember*, to reconstruct the fragments of her memory with the reflective self-awareness that she develops between the opening and closing pages of the novel. By ending where the novel begins, the narrative is distinctly circular. Cisneros resists Western chronological narration and instead, according to Karafilis, imitates the cyclical pattern of “traditional Mexican storytelling and indigenous myth” (68), emphasizing Esperanza’s as a spoken voice.

Esperanza positions the in-between stories within the boundaries of her own community where she becomes increasingly conscious of her limitations as a Mexican-American girl in a Chicago *barrio*. The restricted physical movements on the page mimic the borders that confine Esperanza to fulfilling the role she has inherited. Characters move through and around Mango Street but rarely leave the neighborhood. In “Our Good Day,” for example, Esperanza, Lucy, and Rachel ride their new bike down and back: “Down, down Mango Street we go. Rachel, Lucy, Me. Our new bicycle. Laughing the crooked ride back” (16). Marin’s cousin in “Louie, His Cousin & His Other Cousin” takes everyone for a ride in his presumably stolen yellow Cadillac “up the alley and around the block six times,” circling around Mango Street several times before he is handcuffed and never mentioned again (24). In “The Family of Little Feet,” Esperanza, Lucy, and Rachel

experiment with womanhood by wearing high heels “Down to the corner where the men can’t take their eyes off [them]” and back “up Mango Street, the back way, just in case” (40, 42). In each of these stories, language encloses Esperanza’s coming-of-age story within the borders of Mango Street.

Esperanza directly acknowledges the boundaries that separate her *barrio* from other neighborhoods. In “Cathy Queen of Cats,” Cathy says that her family is moving because “the neighborhood is getting bad” (13). Esperanza understands the implication that her family, who just moved to Mango Street, is part of the decline that causes Cathy’s family to “move a little farther north from Mango Street, a little further away every time people like [them] keep moving in” (13). The short vignette “Those Who Don’t” demonstrates Esperanza’s understanding that fear creates artificial boundaries as she muses that outsiders are only afraid of her community because they do not know the people who live there: “But we aren’t afraid. We know the guy with the crooked eye is Davey the Baby’s brother, and the tall one next to him in the straw brim, that’s Rosa’s Eddie V., and the big one that looks like a dumb grown man, he’s Fat Boy, though he’s not fat anymore nor a boy” (28). Safety is found in familiarity, but, according to Esperanza, safety is also the product of homogeneity: “All brown all around, we are safe. But watch us drive into a neighborhood of another color and our knees go shakity-shake and our car windows get rolled up tight and our eyes look straight. Yeah. That is how it goes and goes” (28). Esperanza imitates, if not accepts, the racial tension that she has inherited while implicitly questioning why these borders exist.

Motions within Esperanza’s community foreground prompts her final decision to leave community boundaries as well as to eventually return. One of the three sisters who “did not seem to be related to anything but the moon” (103) wisely explains Esperanza’s unbreakable connection with her heritage: “When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand? You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street” (105). Esperanza and

Mango Street will be the inheritance that she carries with her as tools for recreating the pieces that already exist within herself, and she will inevitably return to the place that shaped her. Esperanza's encounter with the sister foreshadows her decision to leave and eventually return to Mango Street: "They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out" (110). Esperanza's story will always be intimately connected to the girl who lived on Mango Street, the neighbors whose stories guided that young girl, and, whether she likes it or not, to the "sad red house, the house [that she] belong[ed] but [did] not belong to" (110). Readers do not follow Esperanza outside of Mango Street, demonstrating Esperanza's power as a storyteller to control and contain her own story. Still, the closing pages of *The House on Mango Street* suggest that this is not the end of her story but rather a beginning; a circle.

#### *Esperanza's Relationship with Mango Street*

Esperanza examines her simultaneous sense of belonging and not-belonging by telling the stories of people who live on Mango Street. The telling of these stories allows for Esperanza to learn about herself and to eventually understand it. For example, Mama's story describes her as having "hair that smells like bread" (7), becoming Madame Butterfly while cooking oatmeal in the kitchen, and swearing that she "could've been somebody" (91). The story of Marin is about a girl who stands outside every night with the radio on while "waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life" (27). Minerva's story is based on how she writes poems after her children are asleep and agonizes over a husband who "left and keeps leaving" (85). The story of Darius describes a person "who is sometimes stupid and mostly a fool" (33) but one day notices a world "full of clouds" (33) and points toward one that he calls God. Esperanza knows that Mama, Marin, Minerva, Darius, and all others who characterize Mango Street are deeply

interwoven within her own story. As a storyteller, Katherine Crawford-Garrett writes that Esperanza shows “meta-awareness of each moment weaving a narrative that exists above, beyond and through her actual life experiences” (103). By the end of the novel, Esperanza will accept that these people and moments on Mango Street are the integral and inescapable foundation for her own identity even as she shapes it into something new.

Esperanza’s gradual movement from an observer and collector of stories to a spectator with the capacity to judge the way her neighbors live underlies her development of consciousness. This subtle transition empowers Esperanza to revise the outcome of her own story. Crawford-Garrett uses James Britton and D.W. Harding’s participant and spectator theories as the foundation for her argument that Esperanza’s shift from participant to spectator “allows her to objectively assess the failings of her neighborhood and subsequently move on” (97). From the beginning, Esperanza is frustrated by the failure of her house on Mango Street to be like the one “Papa talked about when he held a lottery ticket and . . . Mama dreamed up in the stories she told us before we went to bed” (4). Increasingly, she also realizes that women in her community are perpetually confined to a place by the window, that outsiders “come into [her] neighborhood scared” (28), that she lives in a place where “there is too much sadness and not enough sky” (33), and that she is a girl who wears “old saddle shoes” (47) that do not match her new dress and takes a rice sandwich for lunch because her family cannot afford lunch meat. Ultimately, according to Crawford-Garrett, recognizing these limitations allows Esperanza to narrate her departure from Mango Street as she transitions from being a participant in her community to a spectator.

Most importantly, Esperanza observes the experiences of women around her and becomes determined that she will not be one of them. She observes Marin, for example, who dreams of marrying a man who will take her to a “big house far away” (26) from Mango Street, even though she currently can only stand outside

after her aunt gets home from work. In these moments of freedom, Marin hopes that a boy will notice her. *Mamacita* refuses to speak English and dreams of “a house in a photograph” as she “sings all the homesick songs about her country” (77) by the window. Young Rafaela inhabits the same space, “getting old from leaning out the window so much” (79) because she is locked inside by a husband who is afraid of her beauty. Sally gets married young to escape her father’s abuse and claims that she is happy except when her husband gets angry and won’t let her talk on the telephone or look out the window (102). Esperanza recognizes and writes down these cycles of unhappiness, vowing that hers will not be like the experiences of Marin, Sally, or *Mamacita* with each story that she tells. At the same time, Esperanza mourns all the things these women could have been. She praises Ruthie’s playfulness and ability to “[see] lovely things everywhere” (68) but laments that she could have been a great many things if she had not “[gotten] married instead and moved away to a pretty house outside the city” (69). While distancing herself from their paths, Jacqueline Doyle claims that Esperanza “writes to celebrate all of their unfulfilled talents and dreams and to compensate for their losses” (10). Esperanza’s dream of liberation, according to Doyle, is both “collective and redemptive” (19). She not only desires freedom for herself but also for the women in her community.

Assessing these stories allows Esperanza to negotiate her own identity by deciding who she will become and accepting who she is. Jayne Marek calls this process the “artistic treatment” (173) of discrimination and otherness that Esperanza encounters as a lower-class Mexican-American female: “The character of Esperanza moves from early dissatisfaction with her identity and life situation through a series of experiences that reveal the nexus of pressures on her, including sex-role expectations, racism and ethnic identity, class discrimination, and the blending of spiritual and material worlds” (179). By observing the residents in her neighborhood, Marek argues that Esperanza develops awareness of herself as a

member of each of these groups. This awareness manifests itself in Esperanza's feelings of shame as she explores the relationship between Mango Street and her own identity. She is embarrassed by "how stupid [she is]" (20) when she envies the music box at Gil's furniture store and cries when the nun makes her stand on a box of books and points toward her house (45), but she cannot name this feeling of shame until later:

I want a house on a hill like the ones with the gardens where Papa works. We go on Sundays, Papa's day off. I used to go. I don't anymore. You don't like to go out with us, Papa says. Getting too old? Getting too stuck-up, says Nenny. I don't tell them *I am ashamed*—all of us staring out the window like the hungry. (86 emphasis added)

Esperanza recognizes Mango Street as the source of her shame when she declares to a perplexed Alicia that she does not have a home: "You live right here, 4006 Mango, Alicia says and points to the house I am ashamed of." Esperanza responds that she never "want[s] to come from" Mango Street (106), but Alicia, like the sisters, tells Esperanza that she cannot reject her heritage: "No, Alicia says. Like it or not you are Mango Street, and one day you'll come back too" (107). Esperanza associates her shame with the house on Mango Street, but the physical house is not her only source of shame; Esperanza is ashamed of herself because, as Alicia and the sister tell her, *Esperanza is Mango Street*.

#### *An Empowered Voice Emerges*

Just as Esperanza inherits Mango Street, she also inherits the myriad voices of the people who live there, and these voices characterize her adolescent speech. Cisneros describes Esperanza's voice as the "unofficial language" that she heard during her childhood: "*Mango Street* is based on the speech of the Chicago streets

where I grew up. It's an anti-academic voice—a child's voice, a girl's voice, a poor girl's voice, a spoken voice, the voice of an American Mexican" (*A House of My Own* 128). Esperanza writes, or rather speaks, using simple language and fragmented, short sentences that replicate the spoken and youthful quality of her voice. Often it sounds as if she is imitating those around her. This mimicking effect frequently occurs when she is repeating judgments about people in her community, especially in the beginning of the novel before she develops her individual awareness. For example, she mentions protecting her younger sister Nenny from the Vargas kids in "Boys & Girls": "She can't play with those Vargas kids or she'll turn out just like them. And since she comes right after me, she is my responsibility" (8). She mentions again later that "They are bad those Vargases" (29) and warns that "You don't want to know" the "[t]wo girls raggedy as rats [who] live across the street" (12). Esperanza initially describes Alicia, who she later admires for going to a university, as "stuck-up ever since she went to college" (12). As the novel progresses, Esperanza's voice becomes increasingly her own.

At the same time, the Esperanza who reflects on and remembers Mango Street chooses to embrace her Chicana voice, internalize her unique language, and reproduce it through narrative. Accepting her voice empowers Esperanza to identify herself as an artist, eventually declaring herself a storyteller. Esperanza develops consciousness through choosing to embrace the ugly, ordinary subjects around her and refining them into something beautiful, reflecting Bakhtin's idea of consciousness as the "necessity of *having to choose a language*" (295). The voice of the girl from Mango Street and the voice of an artist operate together, creating surprising images from simple language. Mice, for example, become "four-legged fur" (32), Rachel and Lucy "smell like a broom" and wear clothes that are "crooked and old" (14), and the trees are "Four who grew despite concrete" (75). She talks about mice, raggedy clothing, and concrete but mixes her childish voice with creative artistry to transform them into unexpected images. Esperanza

simultaneously develops consciousness in the transition between childhood and adulthood and what Bakhtin calls the “creative consciousness” (292) that exists in people who write novels.

Through her creative consciousness, Esperanza uses language to artistically reimagine her ordinary experiences and overcome her circumstances. Cisneros describes the interaction between memory and retelling: “We tell a story to survive a memory in much the same way the oyster survives an invading grain of sand. The pearl is the story of our lives, even if most wouldn’t admit it” (*A House of My Own* 5). Esperanza begins to test the power of language to create her own pearl by refining “unpoetic” encounters on Mango Street. In “Gil’s Furniture Bought & Sold,” Esperanza and Nenny visit a junk store, and Esperanza describes the sound of the music box that the owner plays for Nenny:

Then he starts it up and all sorts of things start happening. It’s like all of the sudden he let go a million moths all over the dusty furniture and swan-neck shadows and in our bones. It’s like drops of water. Or like marimbas only with a funny little plucked sound to it like if you were running your fingers across the teeth of a metal comb. (20)

Esperanza immediately turns away and feels ashamed: “And then I don’t know why, but I have to turn around and pretend I don’t care about the box so Nenny won’t see how stupid I am. But Nenny, who is stupider, already is asking how much” (20). A moment of transformation is contrasted with the reality of her family’s financial circumstances, and Esperanza feels embarrassed for wanting something that she cannot have just as she does when she visits the house with the gardens where her Papa works. In “Chanclas,” Esperanza is embarrassed because she is “wearing the new dress, pink and white with stripes, and new underclothes and new socks and old saddle shoes” (47). Dancing with her Uncle Nacho,



Esperanza no longer thinks about the shoes: “And Uncle spins me, and my skinny arms bend the way he taught me... and everyone says, wow, who are those two who dance like in the movies, until I forget that I am wearing only ordinary shoes” (47). Esperanza oscillates between the interplay of childish innocence, ashamed awareness, and imaginative artistry to define her experiences.

Most importantly, Esperanza is empowered to reimagine her own possibilities for womanhood by interrogating the dangers of sacrificing her autonomy and authority. Esperanza frequently associates the idea of inheritance with the role of women in her community. In “My Name,” she explains that she has inherited the name Esperanza from her great-grandmother, a wild, strong woman who forever resented her husband:

And the story goes she never forgave him. She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow. I wonder if she made the best with what she got or was sorry because she couldn’t be all the things she wanted to be. Esperanza. I have inherited her name, but I don’t want to inherit her place by the window. (11)

Esperanza recognizes that women’s inheritance is the window, eternally mourning unfulfilled dreams and longing to go outside. Similar to Esperanza, Alicia creates new possibilities for herself by attending college, while simultaneously struggling to fulfill her mother’s role: “Alicia, whose mama died, is sorry there is no one older to rise and make the lunchbox tortillas. Alicia, who inherited her mama’s rolling pin and sleepiness, is young and smart and studies for the first time at the university” (31). Cisneros describes her own defiance of traditional Mexican womanhood: “I’m here because my mother let me stay in my room reading and studying, perhaps because she didn’t want me to inherit her sadness and her rolling pin” (“Notes” qtd. in Doyle 9). The Chicana woman’s inheritance is the kitchen,

the window, sadness, and sleepiness. Esperanza recognizes that she, too, will inherit her mother's role without actively revising her own inheritance. Rejecting this legacy, Esperanza, like Cisneros, creates the possibility for reimagining her role as a female.

The confusing transition from childhood to adulthood is confounded further by living between languages that establish different frameworks for thinking about what is normal. Cisneros writes about her personal conflict between different expectations in American and Mexican culture for children leaving their parents' home: "When she thinks to herself in her father's language, she knows sons and daughters don't leave their parents' house until they marry. When she thinks in English, she knows she should've been on her own since eighteen" (*Mango Street* xiii). This language conflict is captured in "My Name" as Esperanza explores what her name means in English and Spanish: "In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting" (10). Even if the English translation is preferable, Esperanza is frustrated that the Spanish pronunciation does not correlate with English sounds: "At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth. But in Spanish my name is made out of a softer something, like silver" (11). Her name cannot capture her sense of self in either language. Instead, she wishes to create something new: "I would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees. Esperanza as Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X. Yes. Something like Zeze the X will do" (11). The name "more like the real [her]" is not found in either translation, so she longs to invent a name that belongs to neither language.

Esperanza's desire to fashion a name capable of capturing her identity evokes Anzaldúa's *lenguaje de la frontera* or language of the borderlands:

For a people who are neither Spanish nor live in a country in which Spanish is the first language; for a people who cannot entirely identify with either standard (formal, Castilian) Spanish nor standard English, what recourse is left to them but to create their own language? A language which they can connect their identity to, one capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves—a language with terms that are neither *español* ni *inglés* but both. (77)

Even though the novel is written primarily in English, neither language can capture the essence of who Esperanza is because she is the product of both languages. In an interview published by the Chicago Public Library, Cisneros describes how she unknowingly allowed Spanish to shape the language of *The House on Mango Street*:

I think my work still has a distinctive voice that is uniquely mine—and that voice is one of a person speaking Spanish in English. By that I mean that I write with the syntax and sensibility of Spanish, even when there isn't a syllable of Spanish present. It's engrained in the way I look at the world, and the way I construct sentences and stories. I was not aware of this when I wrote *House*, but I'm conscious of it now.

Spanish does not extensively pervade the text itself; instead, it infuses the way that Esperanza perceives her community. Owing to indigenous influences, she frequently animates inanimate objects to create unexpected images from ordinary things. She describes the way the windows on her house look so small “you’d think they were holding their breath” (4) and later describes her “house with its feet tucked under like a cat” (22). Spanish is present within how she understands the world and how she tells her stories.

Through inserting the dialogue of other characters into her own speech, Esperanza establishes an emotional connection with Spanish. Ksenija Kondali claims that “Latina/o writers nearly always resort to Spanish as the language of their emotional life, of family values and cultural heritage,” while “English is reserved for the practical” (105). Esperanza does not frequently use Spanish herself, and Regina Betz notes that “the only Spanish words [Esperanza] narrates are when she recites another character’s words or when she refers to Spanish culture, like foods or dance” (30-31). For example, she allows her father’s voice to exist in italicized Spanish: “Your *abuelito* is dead, Papa says early one morning in my room. *Está muerto*” (56). Her father mourns in Spanish. Elenita, the tarot card reader, says “*los espíritus* are here” to communicate a supernatural idea that is more connected with Mexican culture. Through Esperanza, the Spanish-speaking voices of Papa, Elenita, and other characters come to life even though Esperanza’s voice speaks and narrates in English. Further, Cisneros does not use quotation marks to demarcate any dialogue in *The House on Mango Street*. By not marking dialogue in English or Spanish as speech from another, voices from Esperanza’s community literally become part of her own speech.

Through each of these stories, Esperanza is often silently and sometimes directly negotiating how she will revise what it means to be a female who lives in a predominantly Hispanic community within the context of a country that negates her language and culture. The most powerful image that she uses to explore this internal conflict is the contrast between her physical home at 4006 Mango Street and her vision for a real house. Esperanza frequently calls her dream home a house that she can “point to” in an image created from two parallel scenes where she feels ashamed to identify the place where she lives. In the opening vignette, one of the nuns asks Esperanza to point toward her house. In this moment, she realizes the need for a real house that she “could point to” (5) without being ashamed:

Where do you live? she asked.

There, I said pointing up to the third floor.

You live *there*?

*There*. I had to look where she pointed—the third floor, the paint peeling, wooden bars Papa had nailed on the windows so we wouldn't fall out. You live *there*? The way she said it made me feel like nothing.

*There*. I lived *there*. I nodded. (5)

Later, Esperanza envies the “special kids” (43) who are permitted to eat in the lunchroom at school because they live too far away to go home. After convincing her mother to write a note and pack a rice sandwich, one of the nuns sends Esperanza to Sister Superior who questions where she lives: “That one? She said, pointing to a row of ugly three-flats, the ones even the raggedy men are ashamed to go into. Yes, I nodded even though I knew that wasn't my house and started to cry” (45). The kind of real house that Esperanza envisions recalls what Cisneros's classmates thought of as commonplace during their discussion of *The Poetics of Space*: “Our house would be white with trees around it, a great big yard and grass growing without a fence” (*Mango Street* 4). She is ashamed of her actual home where “Bricks are crumbling in places, and the front door is so swollen you have to push hard to get in” (4).

While Esperanza is disappointed that the house her family buys on Mango Street is not the home she imagined, she proudly describes their possession of the space: “The house on Mango Street is ours, and we don't have to pay rent to anybody, or share the yard with the people downstairs, or be careful not to make too much noise, and there isn't a landlord banging on the ceiling with a broom” (3). Esperanza's recognition of the importance of ownership centers what she eventually understands as a metaphorical home of her own. A place that, in the novel, Elenita calls “a home in the heart” (64). Before Esperanza can claim the

artistic power to redefine herself, she must accept Mango Street as “the house [she] belong[s] but [does] not belong to” (110). It is only through accepting her heritage that Esperanza can claim her own space that is “Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man’s house. Not a daddy’s. A house [of her] own” as “clean as paper before the poem” (108), highlighting this as a creative and inventive space where she can remember, reimagine, and redefine herself.

## **II. Resisting Facelessness in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao***

During the 2007 Authors@Google series, Junot Díaz visited Google’s California headquarters to discuss his then new novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. During the talk, he introduces himself by saying that he is a writer who is “interested in probably the dumbest thing you could be interested in if you’re a writer... in the gaps in stories, the places where there isn’t a story” (“Talks at Google” 00:03:14-00:03:29). Díaz explains further that he wanted to write a book about the gaps left behind by the Trujillo dictatorship and later questions how much of Dominican history affects the present—his present in New Jersey. Like his narrator Yunior, Díaz attended Rutgers University where he describes feeling both strangely disconnected from and faintly haunted by his parents’ experience of living in the Dominican Republic during the time of the Trujillo regime:

What happens when you’re a kid like me who goes to Rutgers and basically runs around and chases chicks and you visit a home where your parents were like victims of a dictatorship? . . . When I was at Rutgers dancing salsa, Santo Domingo and Secret Police, that seemed like a million miles away. And yet I would go home and see my mom and my mom’s back would be all scarred and it would suddenly be right there... Is it just that I’m pretending that the history’s not here? Or is it really here? . . . I’m not sure

of the answer. It's more about putting these pieces together and seeing if I could generate any conversation. (00:18:12-00:18:23, 00:21:44-22:14)

*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is the conversation that emerges from examining the interconnectedness of past and present; it is the relationship between victims and children of a dictatorship. Determined to understand how Oscar de León's life connects with his mother Belicia, his grandfather Abelard, and his sister Lola, Yunior embarks on a quest to put history and present side-by-side. In order to do so, Yunior must undertake a project to reconstruct the fragments and fill in the gaps of their lives, what he calls the *páginas en blanco*.

#### *Incongruous Form Defies Order*

In the opening pages of Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the character who we will come to know as Yunior speculates about the origins of the *fukú*, a curse that was supposedly unleashed during the European colonization of the New World. From its alleged African origins and ill-fated passage "through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles" (1), Yunior describes the *fukú* as "something your everyday person could believe in" (2). According to Yunior, *fukú* is cited as the force preventing his uncle from having sons, the source of the Kennedy curse, and the explanation for the unlikely outcome of the Vietnam War. However, Yunior clarifies that he does not create this superstitious backdrop to add credibility to these claims: "Whether I believe in what many have described as the Great American Doom is not really the point. You live as long as I did in the heart of *fukú* country, you hear these kinds of tales all the time" (5). Instead, he validates a worldview with the potential for supernatural explanation and precariously situates himself between belief and disbelief.

The realm of *fukú* stories is also the space Yunior elects for his reconstructive project of Oscar's family history: "I'm not entirely sure Oscar would

have liked this designation. Fukú story. He was a hardcore sci-fi and fantasy man, believed that that was the kind of story we were all living in” (6). Even though Oscar’s fukú story “ain’t the scariest, the clearest, the most painful, or the most beautiful” (6), Yunior recognizes something extraordinary about Oscar’s nerdy quest for love. References to Oscar’s beloved genres, science fiction, fantasy, and fukú abound in the novel, making it clear that “the kind of story” Yunior is trying to tell cannot honestly be captured by any one of these lenses, perhaps not even by all three. The narrative territory he creates becomes an inventive space where multifaceted Afro-Dominican-American identity can interact, fluctuate, and coexist with tension and discord. While Yunior engages all these diverse perspectives, he chooses to classify Oscar’s as a fukú story and his own work as the remedial response: “Even now as I write these words I wonder if this book ain’t a zafa of sorts. My very own counterspell” (7). From the outset of the novel, Yunior’s project is aligned with the possibility for healing that will be deferred to someone else at the end of the novel: Lola’s daughter Isis.

From beginning to end, fukú functions as what Fremio Sepulveda calls the “narrative thread” and “unifying force” (22) of the novel, weaving together Oscar’s sexual frustrations, history of the Dominican Republic, critique of the Trujillo dictatorship, and the multigenerational experiences of Oscar’s immigrant family. The enigmatic curse gives readers a cohesive understanding of seemingly disconnected, out-of-order events, repeatedly revealing itself through tragedies that occur from the time of Oscar’s grandfather Abelard Cabral’s fatal imprisonment to Oscar’s own “final voyage” to the Dominican Republic. Within this timeframe, Yunior’s account is divided into three indistinct parts that move fluidly between time periods, characters, and national borders. Section I, for example, describes Oscar’s nerdiness and remarkably un-Dominican inability to attract women, Lola’s strained relationship with her mother that forces her to live in Santo Domingo with La Inca, and their mother Belicia’s three heartbreaks and movement to New York,



all of which causes the family diaspora that would irreversibly change all their lives. Within this section alone, Yunior shifts focus from Oscar to Lola to Belicia, crosses borders with Lola's movement to Santo Domingo and Belicia's displacement to New York, and shifts back decades to narrate Belicia's youth. While this incongruity feels arbitrary to readers, it seems like a natural progression for Yunior as he pieces together the multigenerational account of the Cabral-de León family.

Yunior intentionally crafts a nonlinear narrative to capture an experience that innately resists order and understanding. He not only deals with Oscar's experience but more broadly enters a conversation about the diasporic and transnational experience of people who live between the United States and the Dominican Republic. Monica Hanna emphasizes that "the history that [Yunior] tells is not one of linear progression like conventional representations of history" but is instead a "cyclical" history (500). As Hanna suggests, non-linear storytelling creates a circular effect where past events have powerful bearing on the present and future, rendering distinct times and events unimportant to understanding the novel. Emily Shiftlette argues that Yunior "combat[s]" the linear notion of history" (22) by telling this story without traditional order. This technique allows him to evoke the sense that the history of repression, violence, and slavery that pervades all subsequent experience and is directly linked to the tragedies that he documents. Shiftlette claims that Díaz cannot "adequately portray the realism of the Dominican Republic" through Western realism because "linear structure would suggest a definite ending to [the] legacy of "fukú"" (22). In other words, Yunior recognizes that chronological order is not an adequate representation of the diasporic experience because the fukú persists indefinitely.

The non-traditional form explains how the fukú has equally haunted all generations of the Cabral-de León family, beginning with Oscar's grandfather Abelard, a doctor and cautious scholar during the time of Trujillo, and extending to Oscar himself. The legacy of slavery, violence, and oppression manifests itself in

the fukú, embodying the consequences of history that are the Afro-Dominican inheritance. Yunior creates this sense in the first pages of the novel: “Santo Domingo might be the fukú’s Kilometer Zero, its port of entry, but we are all of us its children, whether we know it or not” (2). Yunior comments on this idea later after Oscar tries to commit suicide by jumping in front of a train, invoking the curse as the cause of his actions: “I don’t believe in that shit, Oscar. That’s our parents’ shit. It’s ours too, he said” (194). While Yunior the character views the curse as history, Oscar intuitively knows that the curse, and the inheritance that it represents, deeply affects his life and experience. Maria Lauret argues that “Yunior wants to explain nothing less than how” the utopian Dominican Republic “morphed into a dystopia, from Columbus onwards . . .” (499). *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is a narrative that experimentally endeavors to capture this experience.

Within this space, Yunior seamlessly transitions between history and narrative, two elements that he recognizes are inseparable, alternating between the role of self-aware narrator and unofficial historian. Yunior cannot explain the inhuman history of the Dominican Republic and Trujillo without the examples of ordinary lives it has affected, and their stories are the products of history. The two are almost equivalent for Yunior; history is understood through narrative and narrative recounts history. Both intermingle in extensive footnotes that imitate an academic style, while flouting any scholarly credibility that such textual additions usually provide. Instead, Yunior’s footnotes often become areas for speculative or sarcastic elaboration that challenge history and even his own primary text. For example, Yunior uses a footnote to explain his opinion about Oscar’s family choosing to trace their story back to “Abelard and the Bad Thing he said about Trujillo”:

There are other beginnings certainly, better ones, to be sure—if you ask me I would have started when the Spaniards “discovered” the New World or

when the U.S. invaded Santo Domingo in 1916—but if this was the opening that the de Leóns chose for themselves, then who am I to question their historiography? (211)

Through his marginal comments, Yunior interacts with his own text, reinforcing narrative as the authority behind his historiography while introducing doubt about his text itself. T.S. Miller suggests that Yunior's unusual use of footnotes "serve purposes beyond their undercutting of the principal narration, most obviously providing an outlet for Yunior's historiographical impulse: his secret history becomes marginal in multiple ways, a history told from the margins and *in the margins*" (96). Like Miller, Sean O'Brien argues that "uneven glossing" (77-78) in the text supports the overall theme of marginalization and reflects Yunior's authorial decision-making: "The placing of some content in footnotes is an integral part of the text... because it reveals *Yunior's* priorities—what he considers secondary or tangential, but nevertheless worth including" (84). O'Brien argues that Yunior "wishes to challenge readers' ignorance of [Dominican history], but on the other hand, it remains a footnote to a narrative ostensibly focused elsewhere" (84). Yunior uses footnotes to resist official Dominican history and break silences of marginalization. These blank spaces, or *páginas en blanco*, present both the impossibility of accuracy and the opportunity for creation.

Yunior frequently acknowledges his own role as the narrator in these footnotes, just as he often refers to the process of piecing these stories together on the page as he recognizes the limitations to his reconstructive project. The tension between what can be known and what remains permanently concealed is evident when he questions how much Belicia knew about the Gangster: "Due partially to Beli's silence on the matter and other folks' lingering unease when it comes to talking about the regime, info on the Gangster is fragmented; I'll give you what I've managed to unearth and the rest will have to wait for the day the *páginas en*

blanco finally speak” (119). It is clear that Yuniór engages in a research process to exhume as much information as possible. Other evidence suggests that he retrieves information from interviews, tape recordings, photos, letters, and journals throughout the novel. For example, Yuniór describes “reviewing [Belicia’s] old pictures” (92) and how “in every [photo] she’s smiling” (133) during her trip to Samaná with the Gangster. He implies that he recorded a conversation with La Inca about Belicia: “I wish I could say different but I’ve got it right here on tape. La Inca told you you had to leave the country and you laughed” (160). Oscar’s journal, cited multiple times, seems to be one of Yuniór’s primary sources of information: “Was I really reading my roommate’s journal behind his back? Of course I was” (185). Christopher González claims that “Yuniór is not just a narrator who recounts events he has witnessed or stories he has heard. It is clear that he constructs a narrative by putting words onto the page, a fact of which he is acutely aware” (66). Yuniór integrates these sources in what readers understand to be his project-in-progress. This can be seen within the opening pages when he mentions posting a thread about fukú “while [he] was finishing this book,” (6) when he is explaining an alteration from the first draft, (132) and within the final pages when Yuniór reveals his impetus for finally filling in the blank pages Oscar offered to him in a dream (325).

In response to Yuniór’s unnatural narration, many critics have commented on the impossibility that his knowledge could extend into the details of Oscar’s family history, including Miller: “How on earth—by which I mean, how in any realistic narrative—does Oscar’s ex-roommate and Lola’s on-and-off boyfriend manage to access the most intimate details of their ancestors’ lives?” (97). The answer to this, according to Hanna, is that “These silences become construed as a freedom that allows Yuniór to fill in the gaps in a more creative way” as he engages in both traditional research and “imaginatively recreate[s] elements of the story that are otherwise inaccessible” (501). This imaginative element that allows Yuniór to break the silences left by Oscar’s death paradoxically, according to Richard

Patteson, also implies that “the act of telling is itself an exercise of power” (5). This is the very power structure that Yunior resists. As the self-proclaimed writer-historian, Yunior is aware that he exerts tremendous power over the story he tells, comparing writers with dictators:

What is it with Dictators and Writers, anyway? Since before the infamous Caesar-Ovid war they’ve had beef . . . Rushdie claims that tyrants and scribblers are natural antagonists, but I think that’s too simple; it lets writers off pretty easy. Dictators, in my opinion, just know competition when they see it. Same with writers. *Like, after all, recognizes like.* (97)

Still, he recognizes that there are *páginas en blanco* that even he cannot complete. Yunior refuses to decide whether Beli imagines seeing the Mongoose or why Abelard was really imprisoned, revealing that “Even [our] Watcher has his silences, his *páginas en blanco*” (149). Because he has chosen to fill in the blanks at times and this is clearly within his narrative power, it is significant when Yunior chooses not to do this. He often hedges, for example, when dealing with questions that involve confirming or denying supernatural explanations. Yunior will not confirm whether the Mongoose really told Belicia she must survive for her future children or whether the rumor that Abelard had written a “an exposé of the supernatural roots of the Trujillo regime” is true (245). Leaving this open for interpretation, Yunior deliberately creates the possibility for readers to respond with belief or disbelief, just as he did in the opening pages with the introduction of the fukú. The space where his project *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* exists—between history and narrative, English and Spanish, Dominican Republic and United States, imagination and blankness—validates both possibilities.

### *Remembering The Wondrous Oscar Wao*

Like Esperanza, Yunior functions as both character and narrator. While narrator Yunior's voice is tangible throughout, his personal involvement in Oscar's story as his roommate and his sister Lola's on-again, off-again boyfriend is not revealed until halfway through the novel. In fact, the name Yunior is not once mentioned prior to Oscar using it in conversation: "I'd lay back on my bed while Kaneda screamed *Tetsuo* and the next thing I knew Oscar was standing timidly over me, saying, Yunior, the movie is finis . . ." (172). As a character, Yunior's introductory chapter begins immediately after Belicia's initial arrival to New York, opening with the foreboding phrase "It all started with me" (167). The ambiguous statement hints at the fact that Yunior accepts responsibility for playing a part in Oscar's suicide attempt and death, reinforcing his project as the zafa to Oscar's fukú.

From the perspective he reveals in this section, we recognize that Yunior writes because he perceives that he somehow perpetuated the fukú and contributed to Oscar's death. Lauret suggests that regret is Yunior's incentive for the novel's production: "[Yunior] discovers that his own hyper-sexual masculinity may have played a part in determining Oscar's awful end, which makes the telling of it also an act of contrition" (496). As the embodiment of the hyper-masculine, serial-womanizing, weight-lifting Dominican male, Yunior is Oscar's foil: "I had my job and the gym and my boys and my novia and of course I had my slutties" (172). Yunior's own inability to remain faithful, according to Susan Balée, is another type of curse: "Once a girl has won his heart, it is inevitable that he will cheat on her. This is the curse of Dominican men, but it's also part of a larger curse" (342). Oscar tries several times to adopt the mentality that "Latin hypermaleness . . . might be an answer" (*Oscar Wao* 30), but he always fails to adopt this role. Unlike Yunior, Oscar cannot mold himself into this stereotype: "Perhaps if like me he'd been able to his otakuness maybe shit would have been easier for him, but he couldn't" (21).

While narrator Yuniór validates science fiction and fantasy genre lenses, character Yuniór rejects this part of himself and becomes determined to embark on a mission to “fix Oscar’s life” (175) by trying to make Oscar less nerdy and more “Dominican.” Eventually, Yuniór recognizes that Oscar’s need to prove himself by relentlessly pursuing his first hope at romance with Ybón may have led to his downfall. In addition to this, he was partially involved in encouraging Oscar to achieve the rite of passage to Dominican manhood: having sex.

Like Lauret, Sepúlveda calls the novel the “product of a haunting,” which becomes “his *Zafa*, his way to ward off the fukú, and lastly his confessional” (30). After Oscar’s death, Yuniór describes a literal haunting that becomes the impetus for writing Oscar’s story:

About five years after he died I started having another kind of dream. About him or someone who looks like him. We’re in some kind of ruined bailey that’s filled to the rim with old dusty books. He’s standing in one of the passages, all mysterious-like, wearing a wrathful mask that hides his face but behind the eyeholes I see a familiar pair of close-set eyes. Dude is holding up a book, waving for me to take a closer look, and I recognize this scene from one of his crazy movies. I want to run from him, and for a long time that’s what I do. It takes me a while before I notice that Oscar’s hands are seamless and the book’s pages are blank. And that behind his mask his eyes are smiling.

*Zafa.*

Sometimes, though, I look up at him and he has no face and I wake up screaming. (325)

In this dream, Oscar offers Yuniór the opportunity for reconciliation by filling in the *páginas en blanco* of his life story, calling it the *zafa* himself. Yuniór envisions

Oscar's smiling eyes behind the wrathful mask or alternatively sees the nightmarish faceless man. The dream offers supernatural validation for Yuniór's reconstructive project to avoid Oscar becoming another faceless man like the ones that Oscar and Belicia see during their moments of extreme trauma in the cane fields; all of it centered around the threat of eternal silence, blankness, and facelessness.

The threat of Oscar's silencing terrifies Yuniór because he is someone who Yuniór deeply respects and admires despite their strange friendship. At the end of the novel, Yuniór writes, "Years and year now and I still think about him. The incredible Oscar Wao" (324). González emphasizes the product of Yuniór's regret as a memorial for Oscar: "For Yuniór, the book is not a novel—a work of fiction. Rather, it is more of a testimonial or tribute, a hagiography for someone deserving of admiration or respect" (61). Beyond this, writing the wondrous story of Oscar Wao galvanizes Yuniór to fulfill some cosmic purpose to reclaim his own identity:

Took ten years to the day, went through more lousy shit than you could imagine, was lost for a good long while—no Lola, no me, no nothing—until finally I woke up next to somebody I didn't give two shits about, my upper lip covered in coke-snot and coke-blood and I said, OK, Wao, OK. You win. (325)

Resolved to give a voice to the missing pieces of Oscar's life, we can imagine Yuniór embarking on a quest to uncover as much information as possible through interviewing La Inca and their neighbors in Santo Domingo, examining old photographs, reading Oscar's journals, and noting the rumors that surround the Cabral-de León family.

From these disconnected accounts, speculation and hearsay, and Yuniór's own imagination emerge a testimony to the incredible Oscar Wao that grapples with understanding the reason why the fukú has haunted Oscar and his family for



generations. González argues that fukú “affects those who are at a crossroads of identity” (76), suspended between African, Dominican, and American heritage. This vantage point allows Yunior to understand that issues of identity are interwoven in all the complexities of Oscar’s life as Oscar struggled to declare “Soy dominicano. Dominicano soy” to other Dominicans who saw him and said “You’re not Dominican” (49). To understand “that whisper that all long-term immigrants carry inside themselves, the whisper that says *You do not belong*” (*Oscar Wao* 276) in the Dominican Republic, in the United States, anywhere. From his involvement as a character, Yunior recognizes that he was part of this collective whisper, telling Oscar that he did not belong. From his perspective as narrator, closet nerd Yunior has always envied Oscar’s inability to change himself for others. Ultimately, the truest way that Yunior can memorialize the extraordinary experiences of Oscar Wao is by fictionalizing them, interacting with them, and struggling with the implications of Oscar’s family tragedy as he himself negotiates the Afro-Dominican-American inheritance through telling this story.

#### *Challenging the Possibilities and Limitations of Language*

From the framework that Yunior creates for his project and his personal relationship with Oscar, a unique narrative voice emerges on the page. The Yunior who narrates *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is ten years removed from Oscar’s death and from the Yunior who was Oscar’s roommate. At the time of completing this project, he is a teacher, a writer, and a (mostly) faithful husband: “When I’m not teaching or coaching baseball or going to the gym or hanging out with the wifey I’m at home, writing. These days I write a lot. From can’t see in the morning to can’t see at night. Learned that from Oscar. I’m a new man, you see, a new man, a new man” (326). The “new man” is the Yunior who reflectively mediates all other voices in the novel, including his younger self. The product of this narrative

mediation is what Miller calls a “patchwork of discourses” (105) that seamlessly code-switch between English and Spanish (sometimes even Elvish), color the text with street slang and profanity, and make countless allusions to pop culture, comic books, literature, and Dominican history. Rather than filtering these diverse languages, Yunió’s voice engages with the boundaries between languages, dialects, registers, and genres.

A primary source of conflict on the page exists between English and Spanish, though language tension exceeds beyond this dichotomy. Characterizing the interaction between these languages in terms of a battle is appropriate according to an interview in which Díaz discusses the relationship between English and Spanish in his writing: “When I learned English in the States, this was a violent enterprise. And by forcing Spanish back onto English, forcing it to deal with the language it tried to exterminate in me, I’ve tried to represent a mirror-image of that violence on the page” (Céspedes 904). This self-proclaimed “revenge on English” is achieved through written code-switching, or the alternation between languages. Despite his attempt to artistically recreate the violence between these languages, Díaz insists that the amalgamation of languages in his writing is not incorporated to alienate or exclude the reader, as many critics claim. Instead, he explains that incomprehensibility is an unavoidable part of everyday communication as people interact with different knowledge bases that often prevent rather than facilitate mutual understanding:

So... people have come to me and asked me... are you trying to lock out your non-Dominican reader, you know? And I’m like, no? I assume any gaps in a story and words people don’t understand, whether it’s the nerdy stuff, whether it’s the Elvish, whether it’s the character going on about *Dungeons and Dragons*, whether it’s the Dominican Spanish, whether it’s the sort of high level graduate language, I assume if people don’t get it that

this is not an attempt for the writer to be aggressive. (“Junot Díaz: Quotable Quote”)

According to Díaz, these “gaps” are reflective of a “normal component in communication, incomprehension” that result from clues, words, and languages not being transmitted successfully between speakers: “When all of us are communicating and talking when we’re out in the world, we’ll be lucky if we can understand 20 percent of what people say to us” (“Junot Díaz: Quotable Quote”). This miscommunication exists between native speakers but inspires additional anxiety in the immigrant who does not know where the breakdown in communication occurs. The way that language operates for Díaz is more complex than just code-switching between English and Spanish; it extends to how we know, interact with, and perceive the world.

Yunior’s languages, registers, dialects, and references reflect his own diverse funds of knowledge. All these voices coexist in Yunior’s head as a Dominican, African, and American male, as someone who grew up in a Dominican neighborhood in New York and becomes a professor at Middlesex Community College, and as someone who is both haunted by Dominican history and fascinated by American pop culture. These languages both conflict and coincide with one another, allowing Yunior to be both the stereotypical Dominican male and closet American pop culture nerd, an aspiring writer and street-smart player, and an unofficial historian who understands Dominican history through Oscar’s (and perhaps his own) beloved genres. Díaz truly allows this multiplicity of voices, or what Bakhtin calls “heteroglossia,” to coexist in his text within Yunior’s narrative voice. This coexistence inherently captures the tension between English and Spanish, past and present, slang and academia, United States and Dominican Republic, and boundless other oppositions that exist within identity and are manifold in the immigrant and diasporic identity.

As a writer (for both Díaz and his narrator counterpart), the decision to embrace his languages and all their associations is a strong statement of identity. Díaz talks about the struggles of being an intellectual in his Dominican community: “Nobody seems to catch more unwarranted, bizarrely irrational strange shit, just for being smart . . . because the very fact that you're a smarty-pants means you're some sort of secret traitor. People are always like, you're so white, you're not like us” (Isaac qtd. in Balée 345). In response, Balée observes that “[Díaz] learned to code switch. Not just from language to language, but from identity to identity” (345). Balée hints at a connection that is integral to understanding how language functions in Díaz’s novel: language is the closest approximation to the expression of identity, even if this is an imperfect expression. Consciousness, interaction, and self-expression are all mediated by the languages that each person has internalized. According to Bakhtin, these languages are adopted only when a speaker applies “his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention” (293). The interaction between these adopted languages culminates in the symbolic representation of identity. Internally, this is a cohesive system, but externally conflict exists between personal consciousness that imperfectly interacts with reality and with what Bakhtin describes as the “socio-ideological consciousness” (276). In this case, the way that the reader will interact with the text.

Yunior’s languages are his own expression of transnational identity as he reveals himself through the way that he intercedes as both a narrator and character in the stories he tells. In response to Lourdes Torres’ work on code-switching that describes Díaz’s technique as a way to gratify the bilingual reader (83), Eugenia Casielles-Suárez proposes the alternative term “radical hybridism” because, rather than merging these languages fluidly, “Díaz is more interested in flouting the rules in order to create powerful, disjunctive, linguistic hybrids” (482). While Casielles-Suárez characterizes these languages as detached and disconnected from one

another, I argue that Yunior's language operates cohesively and fluidly through his internalized language repertoire. O'Brien claims that *Oscar Wao* becomes a space where "language, like cultures and communities, can interact without necessarily being assimilated or fused together into a homogeneous identity" (80). Yunior's reality is captured by the combination of all these voices. This is evident when he describes Trujillo's sister known as *La Fea* who has just been revealed as the Gangster's wife:

There are those alive who claim that La Fea had actually been a pro herself in the time before the rise of her brother, but that seems to be more calumny than anything, like saying that Balaguer fathered a dozen illegitimate children and then used the pueblo's money to hush it up—wait, that's true, but probably not the other—shit, who can keep track of what's true and what's false in a country as baká as ours—what is known is that the time before her brother's rise had made her una mujer bien fuerte y bien cruel; she was no pendeja and ate girls like Beli like they were pan de agua—if this was Dickens she's have to run a brothel—but wait, she *did* run brothels! (139)

Within this paragraph, Yunior uses English and Spanish, Dominican slang, profanity in both languages, and references Dominican history as easily as he references Charles Dickens. Díaz can create the same effect within a single sentence, sometimes even a single phrase. For example, Yunior describes the relationship between La Inca and her adopted niece Belicia by drawing from both Spanish and *The Lord of the Rings*: "Respectability so dense in la grande that you'd need a blowtorch to cut it, and a guardedness so Minas Tirith in la pequeña that you'd need the whole of Mordor to overcome it" (78). It seems that to understand

Oscar's story, Yunion must draw knowledge from all his diverse knowledge bases and filter these experiences through his own understanding of reality.

Ultimately, however, Yunion recognizes that his own language is an insufficient, imperfect medium for communicating the violence that underlies all the Cabral-de León family fukú stories, or their *páginas en blanco*. Violence resists linguistic representation. This is revealed when Yunion attempts to describe Belicia's brutal beating in the cane field after Trujillo's sister finds out about her relationship with the Gangster:

How she survived I'll never know. They beat her like she was a slave. Like she was a dog. Let me pass over the actual violence and report instead on the damage inflicted: her clavicle, chicken-boned; her right humerus, a triple fracture (she would never again have much strength in that arm); five ribs, broken; left kidney, bruised; liver, bruised; right lung, collapsed; front teeth, blown out. About 167 points of damage in total and it was only sheer accident that these motherfuckers didn't eggshell her cranium, though her head did swell to elephant-sized proportions. Was there a time for a rape or two? I suspect there was, but we shall never know because it's not something she talked about. All that can be said is that it was the end of language, the end of hope. It was the sort of beating that breaks people, breaks them utterly. (147)

Yunion attempts to compare the beating to one like that of a slave or a dog before deciding to provide a report of the damages rather than narrating Belicia's experience. What follows reads like a medical report characterized by Yunion's sarcastic commentary. He introduces the possibility that Belicia was raped by Trujillo's henchmen, although he cannot confirm nor deny this theory. Beyond this, according to Yunion, "All that can be said is that it was the end of language. The

end of hope” (147). Yuniór recognizes that there are experiences beyond the bounds and limitations of what language can capture, he defaults to insufficient explanations, and then he evades narrating the violence at all.

These moments are synonymous with the motif of the *páginas en blanco* and the faceless man who appears during traumatic instances of extreme, otherworldly, and unfathomable violence. In the moment between life and death when Oscar, like his mother, receives “the beating to end all beatings” (298) in the cane field, he swears that there is a third faceless man beating him just as Beli thought that she saw another man in the cop car who “*didn’t have a face*” (141). The faceless man who appears in these moments of extreme trauma is a physical manifestation of the *páginas en blanco*, or history, that cannot be known because it has either been silenced or is at “the end of language,” beyond what Yuniór’s default science fiction and fantasy can attempt to explain. During the process of making sense of the remnants of Oscar’s life, there are moments that Yuniór cannot or, more importantly, does not attempt to describe because the experiences are outside the realm of narrative power.

Amid profound horror, the Mongoose is a source of hope and optimism. According to one of Yuniór’s footnotes, the Mongoose travelled from Africa to the Caribbean during the initial diaspora: “Believed to be an ally of Man. Many Watchers suspect that the Mongoose arrived in our world from another, but to date no evidence of such a migration has been unearthed” (151). The Mongoose, like the fukú, owes itself to the Dominican and Caribbean “extraordinary tolerance for extreme phenomena” (149). Again, Yuniór cannot confirm nor deny whether or not it is “a figment of Beli’s wracked imagination or something else altogether” (149). According to Yuniór, Belicia claims to have survived because the Mongoose promised her the existence of a future son and daughter, Oscar and Lola. The same Mongoose supposedly appears later to give Oscar the choice between life and death:

Oscar remembers having a dream where a mongoose was chatting with him.  
Except the mongoose was the Mongoose.

What will it be, muchacho? it demanded. More or less?

And for a moment, he almost said less. So tired, and so much pain—

Less! Less! Less!

—but then in the back of his head he remembered his family. Lola and his mother and Nena Inca. Remembered how he used to be when he was younger and more optimistic. The lunch box next to his bed, the first thing he saw in the morning. *Planet of the Apes*.

More, he croaked.

-----, said the Mongoose, and then the wind  
swept him back  
into darkness. (301)

Like the many things that remain unknown, the Mongoose's final words to Oscar are amongst the *páginas en blanco* that Yúnior does not try to make known. However, the Mongoose introduces a source of hope that follows children of diaspora from Africa to the Dominican Republic to the United States. Despite Oscar's murder, hope characterizes the final pages of the novel. Eight months after Oscar's death, Yúnior receives a package that reveals Oscar and Ybón actually did spend a weekend together. In his letter, Oscar revises Joseph Conrad's famous line from *The Heart of Darkness*: "So this is what everybody's talking about! Diablo! If only I'd known. The beauty! The beauty!" (335). Oscar also promises Lola the arrival of a second package that is "the cure to what ails us... The Cosmic DNA" (333). This package never arrives.



### III. Conclusion

For both Esperanza and Yuniór, remembering Mango Street and Oscar Wao is freedom from the limitations and ambiguity that pervade their Borderlands. The space between Mexican and American and Dominican and American becomes a place for the exploration and reconciliation of identities. In this space, Esperanza constructs a narrative through unifying fragmented stories and voices from Mango Street, while Yuniór reconstructs the fragments of Oscar's life. The catalyst for documenting these stories is a heritage that haunts the protagonists. Writing her experiences liberates Esperanza from her constricting circumstances: "I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much" (Cisneros 110). Yuniór's often-nightmarish dreams about Oscar becoming the faceless man haunt him for years before he finally decides to accept the blank book. Behind the "wrathful mask" Oscar wears, his "eyes are smiling" as he says "*Zafa*" (Díaz 325), connecting writing with the possibility for redemption as the remedy opposite the fukú. Esperanza envisions a home that is "clean as paper before the poem" (Cisneros 108), and Yuniór accepts the blank pages of Oscar's book. Blank pages become the opportunity for redemptive projects of recollection.

Esperanza slowly begins to understand the possibilities of writing that ultimately allow her to accept Mango Street, connecting her eventual departure with her community. First, Esperanza recognizes this during a childish jump rope game when she tells Nenny not just to repeat the same old song: "You gotta use your own song. Make it up, you know?" (52). Later, Aunt Guadalupe warns Esperanza that she must never quit writing her poems: "You just remember to keep writing, Esperanza. You must keep writing. It will keep you free, and I said yes, but at that time I didn't know what she meant" (61). Esperanza will not understand what she means fully until she identifies herself as a storyteller in the final vignette:

I like to tell stories. I tell them inside my head. I tell them after the  
mailman says,  
Here's your mail. Here's your mail he said.  
I make a story for my life, for each step my brown shoes take. I say,  
"And so she  
trudged up the wooden stairs, her sad brown shoes taking her to the house  
she never liked."  
I like to tell stories. I am going to tell you a story about a girl who didn't  
want to  
belong. (109)

Esperanza is empowered to rewrite her own story and embrace the source of her shame, restriction, and sadness. When Esperanza accepts that her heritage— that Mango Street— *is* her narrative, she is free: "I write it down and Mango says goodbye sometimes. She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free" (110). One day, Esperanza knows that she will leave, but she also knows that her past, her future, and the ambiguous thing called identity are perpetually linked to Mango Street. Esperanza's story ends with the resolution that someday she will return "For the ones [she] left behind. For the ones who cannot out" (110).

Yunior regards writing as synonymous with the *zafa*, and finishing his project *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* "fulfills [Yunior's] cosmic duty" (329) to preserve the remnants of Oscar's life that would otherwise be silenced by powerful, evil men in the Dominican Republic just like thousands and thousands of lives during the Trujillo dictatorship. Oscar's death at the close of the novel reveals the lingering effects of this legacy, but it does not have the power to silence profound optimism for the future. Writing is linked with Yunior's own redemption: "These days I write a lot. From can't see in the morning to can't see at night. Learned that from Oscar. I'm a new man, you see, a new man, a new man" (326).

There is also another source of redemption revealed in the final pages: Lola's daughter Isis. Lola and Yunion unsurprisingly do not end up together, but Yunion writes that he and Lola still run into each other from time to time, and Lola is usually with her daughter. He writes that young Isis wears three *azabaches*, or powerful black stones that supposedly ward off evil. She wears "the one Oscar wore as a baby, the one Lola wore as a baby, and the one that Beli was given by La Inca upon reaching Sanctuary" (329). Yunion imagines that someday Isis, like Abelard and Belicia and Oscar, will know about the curse:

One day, though, the Circle will fail.  
As Circles always do.  
And for the first time she will hear the word *fukú*.  
And will have a dream of the No Face Man.  
Not now, but soon. (330)

After encountering the family curse, Yunion expects that Isis will come looking for him to find answers, and he will invite her into his home and pull out Oscar's old "games, his manuscript, his comic books, his papers" to tell her about her *tio* (330). Yunion defers hope to the next generation for remedying the lingering effects of the past:

And maybe, just maybe, if she's as smart and as brave as I'm expecting  
she'll be,  
she'll take all we've done and all we've learned and add her own insights  
and she'll put an end to it.  
That is what, on my best days, I hope. What I dream. (331)

Other sleepless nights, Yuniór flips through Oscar's old copy of *Watchmen* and notices that the only comic book panel Oscar has ever written in is a quote from Dr. Manhattan that he circled three times: "In the end? Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends" (331). The end of the fukú, the haunting of history, is indefinite and perhaps nonexistent, but the greatest hope for the future is the next generation who will continue to deconstruct boundaries, recognize disparate power structures, and change something.

Yuniór and Esperanza cannot escape from the past. Esperanza cannot wish herself to be someone else or wish away the year she has lived on Mango Street, and Yuniór cannot lose himself in women and drugs. Personal history, national history, and family history are suffused in all their present moments, but writing allows them the opportunity to name these distinct characteristics of someone living between identities; to name oppression, shame, sadness, violence, and discrimination. Accepting their heritage and transforming experiences resistant to language into words enables Yuniór and Esperanza to reimagine potential for the future. At one point, Lola considers pursuing happiness by running away and disappearing but decides to stay: "But if these years have taught me anything it is this: you can never run away. Not ever. The only way out is in" (209). The only way to escape marginalization, oppression, shame, and countless other ghosts that haunt the Borderlands is by inventing a new narrative that confronts past and present together. To conclude in Lola's words, "that's what I guess these stories are all about" (209).

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